DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 043 CS 210 261

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TITLE Culture Shock: Men's and Women's Myths of Literacy in Academe.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (76th, San Antonio, TX, November 21-26, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; Cultural Influences; Higher Education; *Individual Development; Language Attitudes; *Literacy Education; *Participation; *Personal Autonomy; *Sex Differences; Social Attitudes; Social Behavior; Writing Instruction; Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Writing Attitudes

ABSTRACT

A study of over 200 personal narratives, in which college freshman writers related their experiences of achieving literacy, offered insights into cultural differences in attitudes toward literacy. The activity of becoming literate was fundamentally the same for males and females, but the myths they used to understand and explain their experiences at each stage of the process were different. Males' experiences reinforced a myth of literacy for autonomy and females' experiences reinforced a myth of literacy for participation. In analyzing the personal narratives, it became clear that the gender of the reader was as significant as the gender of the writer. An experiment with graduate student teachers indicated that when a female read the narratives, it was more likely to be scored high if it was representative of the autonomy myth and if she had attributed it to a male. When a male read the narratives, he assigned higher scores to narratives he attributed to women, but showed only a slight preference for the narratives that fit the female participation myth paradigm. Experience may have taught women, both as writers and readers, that identification with male values and traits will enhance their chances for academic success. Students of both sexes need to be taught to balance the demands of both participation and autonomy. (SRT)

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Culture Shock: Men's and Women's Myths of Literacy in Academe

Is writing by women different from writing by men?

This is a question asked by many theorists, critics, and researchers; and any answer will be of obvious interest to those of us who study and teach writing (or use writing to teach)--who devise topics for writing assignments and evaluate the results our male and female students produce.[1]

But this question cannot be fully answered unless we also ask another, more basic question. Rather than asking,

"Is writing by women different from writing by men?"

we must instead ask,

"Is writing different for women than it is for men?"

In other words, to employ a popular dichotomy in composition studies, we must ask not about the product, but about the process. Not about texts, but about the activity of writing. More specifically, what are our notions about how and why we learn to write?

For several years now I have been studying autobiographical narratives college freshmen have written about events from their experience of learning to read and write. I have chosen to examine these autobiographical accounts of the acquisition of literacy not because I expect to find verifiable truths about the process of acquiring literacy, but because they offer key

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insights into culturally shared assumptions about the nature of literacy--about how and why we learn to read and write.

These autobiographical narratives, because they are self-reflexive, transform contextual elements of learning to read and write into textual elements. In autobiography, writers represents their societies' shared cultural myths--those images that give philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life--because they use these myths to explain their experience and interpret their lives. Indeed those cultural myths have so shaped their language that they cannot escape retelling them even if she means to distort or misrepresent. Reading autobiographical narratives from many members of a group will make these myths all the more apparent, identifiable, and amenable to systematic analysis.

Thus the following version of the process of becoming literate describes that process not in universally generalizable terms but as it is experienced and described by the writers whose work I have studied, students in two U. S. universities.

The student narratives[2] share a common macrotext:

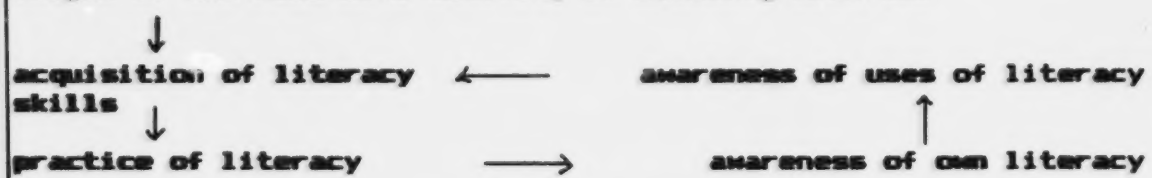
> I acquired literacy skills. Then I was able to use these skills. As I used these skills I became aware that I possessed them. This awareness led me to an awareness that I could use my literacy to achieve certain purposes. Realizing literacy was of use, I furthered my skills. As I increased my skills, I had more occasion for using them . . .

Because narrative is lineal, this version of the macrotext for stories of acquiring literacy necessarily presents the activity as a lineal process. An abstract version of this

macrotext, presented in Figure 1, reflects the essentially recursive nature of the activity of learning to read and write, breaking the activity into four distinct phases. The first phase I call the acquisition of literacy skills, learning the conventions for encoding and decoding written discourse. This phase is followed by the practice of literacy, actually reading and writing. The practice of literacy leads to the third phase, an awareness of one's literacy. And this awareness leads to the fourth stage of the recursive activity, the awareness of the uses of literacy.

Figure 1

Stages of the Recursive Activity of Becoming Literate



This recursive activity is theoretically a never-ending one--the fourth stage, awareness of the uses of literacy, leads again to the first, further acquisition of literacy skills.

A writer progresses through each of these stages within the context of a particular culture's literacy practices, practices determined by the culture's shared values and established power relations. So while little boys and little girls go through the same recursive phases of the activity, what they experience and the ways they interpret that experience will differ according to the culture's shared myths about literacy and its myths about

the differences between boys and girls. Recognizing such differences is essential to understanding the literacy practices of any group.[3]

To illustrate this point in the following discussion, I have provided two narratives which exemplify the differences in the male and female literacy myths. I have selected the two narratives presented here from among over two hundred narratives I have collected from students in my own and two other colleagues' freshman composition classes. Just as each of the two hundred narratives is what Kenneth Burke calls a "representative anecdote" (Grammar of Motives) from the many stories of experience the student might have told, my choice of each of these two narratives has been based on its value as an anecdote representative of the wider sample. I have organized my analysis of these two according to the successive phases of becoming literate outlined above. The scheme in Figure 2 summarizes this analysis.

Figure 2

Differences between Female and Male Students' Narratives:

FEMALE--myth of participation	MALE--myth of autonomy
acquisition of skills: focus on process and cooperative effort	focus on measurable results; individual achievement
practice of literacy: participation with others; shared experience	solitary activity; comparison of achievement against others
awareness of literacy: own or others' expression of surprise, praise	achievement of goal set by self or others
awareness of uses of literacy: a way to please; hopes for gaining an audience	a way to satisfy expectations; hopes for gaining control over self and others

Though a full literacy autobiography will relate experiences which show passage through all four of the phases, each of the student narratives usually focuses the drama in one phase.

The activity of becoming literate is fundamentally the same for males and females, but the myths they use to understand and explain their experiences at each stage of the process are different. Thus a boy's experiences may reinforce his myth of literacy for autonomy while a girl's experiences may reinforce her myth of literacy for participation.

When women writers give an account of their acquisition of literacy skills, their narratives focus on the process and describe a cooperative effort. This supports and is explained by Carol Gilligan's thesis that women achieve identity

through relationships. Carol Gilligan's work, In a Different Voice, addresses differences between boys' and girls' psychological and moral development. Gilligan shows that most theories of psychological development have been based on a male model and, therefore, equate maturation with autonomy. Research by Alishio and Schilling reaches similar conclusions. Their study examining William Perry's scheme of intellectual and ethical development for sex differences regarding occupational choice, interpersonal relationships, and sexual identity revealed that ego development was "highly correlated with intellectual development for men but unrelated for women" (213).

In describing the first phase of the activity of becoming literate, the narratives of the college women I have read emphasize the give-and-take between teacher and learner, and relate the way a teacher--whether a school teacher, parent, or sibling--helped them and how they responded to the teacher's encouragement. When male students describe this first phase of the activity of becoming literate, they usually focus on their individual achievement. Teachers and parents are presented as authorities who explain the rules and establish expectations which must be met.

When women students relate accounts of their literacy practice, they present it in terms of their participation with others--whether participation in family activities, in class at school, or in a circle of friends.

The male student writers I have studied rarely make

reference to others when they give accounts of their reading and writing practices. Instead, they usually portray themselves as solitary, and when they do mention others it is in order to compare their efforts against those of others.

In narratives focussed on moments in which they became aware of the their newly acquired literacy, women writers usually tell of receiving recognition and praise from others--parents, teachers, or friends. Many treat this as a moment of surprise--as though they had never expected it or even sought it.

In narratives dramatizing awareness of their literacy, male writers are more likely to describe moments when they achieved a goal they had set for themselves or that had been set for them.

The final phase of acquiring literacy, becoming aware of the uses of literacy, also receives different treatment from female writers and male writers. Women relate stories about using their literacy to fulfill their desire to please. When they look ahead to further development of their literacy, women writers usually emphasize their hopes for gaining an audience and sharing ideas.

Male student writers tell stories of using their literacy to satisfy expectations and requirements of them. They are more likely to relate their hopes for attaining more control over their lives and being able to influence others.

Dona's essay, which follows, is representative of the female myth of literacy as a means of particiipation.

DONA

"How I Learned to Read and Write"

I remember one incident from when I was younger. The extent of my reading and writing career was still short. Bound and determined, I sat down with my sister's "Dick and Jane" book and read. I continued to read, and read. I read all day, and finished all one hundred or more pages. My pride and my sister's pride were boiling over that day. History had been made. My first book was finished. I had read the entire story without giving up to boredom or frustration.

I have to admit that my first story was not conquered without any wounds on my part. I must have stopped reading, twice every page, to ask my sister how to pronounce the longer words, which I thought were a different language.

That was my first reading experience. I guess, as you learn to read, you also learn to write. Spelling and general grammer are learned, but my first experience of actually writing something came when I was in the fourth grade. By saying writing, I mean creating something. I mean pulling ideas from my head and putting them onto paper. That experience was when I wrote a poem for my mother. It said something about her living in a big house, being beautiful, and not being afraid of a mouse. The reaction I received from her made me truly enjoy writing.

I learned to read because it was a challenge. I learned to write because when I did I influenced people's feelings and thoughts. The idea of being able to create

something from nothing, and having the power to get people thinking, fascinated me.

Brian's essay is representative of the male myth of literacy as a means of achieving autonomy.

BRIAN

"How I learned to read and write"

Unlike many other students my education didn't begin until the very end of the second grade. My father was given a job overseas in Brazil. When we finally got settled into the social aspect of a foreign country I realized that it wasn't for me.

I started off going to school regularly. But as time wore on I began to skip classes. I confided in my mother and told her what I had been doing and how I felt about the schooling I was receiving. Foolishly she agreed with me and told me that I no longer had to attend. She said she was planning on leaving the country anyhow.

We arrived in the United States in the middle of my second grade year. My mother immediately enrolled me in the second grade. Within a couple of days the school had contacted my mother and told her that I should be placed back into first grade due to my inability to read and write.

My mother and I discussed this major decision at length. We both decided that it would be rough on me psychologically being so old and not being able to be with friends my own age. So my mom asked what she could do to

help get me back on tract.

By the end of my second grade year I was in the highest reading group. With the help of my mother and my second grade teacher I also excelled in my other areas of education.

When I reached highschool I was placed in all the advanced reading and writing competency classes. I received high grades in all of these subjects.

I guess I have become disallusioned. I thought that this great success would continue into the higher echalon of college. But I have come to realize quite the contrary. For the first time in my life I am being considered an average student in the area of English.

In this freshman English class we have turned in several in-class essays. I have always had a terrible time with in class essays. When I write, I write from the heart not from an English textbook. I sometimes get carried away and forget about fragments and comma splices. I always thought of these as mistakes that could be corrected in a final copy. But I guess I am not going to be able to show my imagination in writing anymore. I will have to resort to being "correct," and using "formal" grammar.

I hope to someday be able to be both correct and imaginative and not make any mistakes on an in class essay so I can once again be realized as a good writer.

At each of the stages, it is not the literacy activities themselves but the female students' interpretation and representation of these activities which differs from that of male students. For example, while a female student is just as likely as a male student to mention having participated in a reading contest sponsored by the local library, she is more likely to say how much she enjoyed it while the male is more likely to mention that he was one of the winners.

What is so striking about these differences in literacy experiences is that they arise out of different interpretations of shared activities of both boys and girls in a single classroom, and both brothers and sisters in a single family.

To this point I have been describing what I saw as I read and analyzed these two-hundred-plus student narratives--I have presented what has purported to be a description of differences between college men's and women's literacy practices and differences between men's and women's literacy attitudes.

But, of course, I have in fact been describing to you my own reading--revealing to you my own literacy myths and my own gender myths as a reader. The necessarily subjective nature of my analysis has become too obvious for me to ignore in the most recent phase of my research, for I have seen that the gender of the <u>reader</u> is as significant as the gender of the writer.

From among the 200 hundred narratives, I selected 45 written by students in two sections taught by one of my colleagues at Eastern Michigan University. Students in each section were then asked to read the narratives written by students in the other section and to guess the gender of each of the authors. (Their

quesses were accurate in 185 of 223 readings--72%)

From those 45 narratives, 13 were selected at random for readings by graduate teaching assistants who teach freshman writing courses at our university. For each of the narratives they read, the TA's were asked to identify which of the two literacy myths--literacy for autonomy or literacy for partticipation--was best represented. Additionally, they were asked to assign a holistic score of one to ten to the overall quality of each narrative, to guess the gender of the author, the race, the socioeconomic status, and to predict the author's potential for success in college based on evidence in the narrative.

I'll be limiting my report of the results of these readings to a description of the relationships between myth identifications, narrative quality scores, and gender guesses. And rather than tabulating and then making premature generalizations on the basis of only the 169 readings resulting from 13 teachers each reading 13 student narratives, I will focus on a detailed description of readings by two teachers. In other words, I will present my analysis of their readings of ten narratives as case studies--of some interest because these two readers MIGHT be typical, but of great interest for what it tells us about these two teachers' particular classrooms.

TACHUG is the code name of a female teacher/reader. Of the ten gender guesses she made, 5 (or 50%) were accurate (compare that with the 72% accuracy of the freshman readers). TACHUG identified 5 of the ten narratives as representative of the

literacy for autonomy myth (50%) and 5 as representative of the literacy for participation myth (50%). For those narratives she identified as autonomous myths, 4 (66%) were scored high for overall quality. (A "high" score is determined by calculating the median score she assigned. Those above that score are high, and those below that median are "low.") For those narratives she identified as participation myths, 2 (40%) were high.

TACHUG assigned high scores to all of the narratives she guessed were written by males, but to only 2 Of 6 (33%) of narratives she guessed were written by women.

Of the narratives she identified as autonomy myths by males, all were scored high, but of those she identified as participation myths by women, only 1 of 5 (20%) was scored high. She gave a high score to the one narrative she identified as a particpation myth written by a male, but gave a high score to only one of the two (50%) narratives she identified as autonomy myths by females.

What are the patterns here? When TACHUG reads a narrative, it's more likely to be scored high if it's representative of the autonomy myth and more likely to be scored high if she guesses it was written by a male.

TARZAN, a male teacher, (they chose their own code names) read the same ten narratives very differently. TARZAN's gender guesses were 66% accurate--still not as accurate as the novice freshmen readers' guesses, but more accurate than TACHUG's. TARZAN identified 2 of 10 narratives as representative of the autonomy myth and 8 as representative of the participation myth. Obviously the myth identification of

these narratives is not consistent between even two readers. Of those narratives TARZAN identified as autonomy myths, he gave a high score to one (50%). And he gave a high score to 4 of the 8 (50%) myths he identified as particpation myths. In other words, he doesn't show a preference for either myth.

For narratives TARZAN guessed were by male writers, he gave a high score to only one of 3 (33%). But for narratives he guessed were by females he gave a high score in 4 out of 7 cases (57%).

TARZAN did not attribute any of the autonomy myths to males. He gave high scores to 3 of the 5 (60%) participation myths he attributed to females. Of the two autonomy myths he attributed to women, 1 (50%) was rated high, and of the two particpation myths he attributed to males, 1 (50%) was rated high.

Overall, then TARZAN might appear to be a less biased reader. He identifies narratives as participation myths four times as often as autonomy myths, but he does not seem to prefer one myth to the other. He assigns higher scores to narratives he attributes to women (57%) than to those he attributes to men (33%), but shows only a slight preference (60%) for the narratives that fit the female-participation myth paradigm.

I realize that this description of these two teachers' readings raises more questions than it answers. But it makes two points evident. First, narrative quality is a subjective evaluation. Second, the identification of a myth is the result of a subjective reading. Neither of these points is earthshattering, so let me rephrase--this description tells us

that how readers read is as significant as what writiers write.

Let me return to those findings from earlier research I mentioned at the beginning of my essay--now that I've called their reliability into question. The characterization I have made of differences between women's and men's literacy myths may be nothing more than a representation of my own literacy myths and gender myths. This later stage of analysis--the TA readings--has moved me from reading student writing to reading teachers' readings. As you listen to me, you make yet another reading--we fold and fold again.

But the complication of this subjectivity is exactly what makes the analysis of students' autobiographical narratives of the acquisition of literacy interesting--even necessary.

If students write this way and teachers read this way, a critique is necessary. Experience may have taught these women--both as student/writers and as teacher/readers-- that identification with male values and traits will enhance their chances for academic success.[3] Indeed, this may be the explanation of why TACHUB's readings seem more biased against the females and the participation myth than TARZAN's reading are. TACHUB has shown us that she has <u>internalized</u> the autonomy myth--perhaps because she HAD to to successfully complete her undergraduate education and gain entrance into graduate school. If so, what does this tell us about the experience of women in college?

It would seem that young women who hope for academic success in college must adopt (or appear to adopt) the literacy for autonomy myth--the male myth. If so, there are some obvious

implications for teachers. Once we recognize these literacy myths of our culture, what is the responsible course of action?

First, our women students must be prepared to recognize the values of academe and find ways of reconciling the inevitable conflicts they will face. Moreover, we must re-evaluate our own experiences as writers and as readers and consider the influence of our expectations on the young men and women we teach.

We must not only understand the conflict between the two cultural myths of literacy and the resulting disequilibrium, but also find ways to help our students reconcile the apparent opposition between the myths. Here, a paradox presents itself. While the male student's adherence to his myth of literacy for autonomy allows him to participate successfully in the literacy culture of academe, the female student's adherence to the myth of literacy for participation may only ensure that she is not taken seriously as a student, thinker, writer, adult.

As academics and as teachers of academic literacy, we must recognize the paradox and devise ways to bring it to our students' awareness as well. Our female students must discover that only by developing their autonomy can they ensure their continued participation in an academic culture which seeks to prepare them to think for themselves, act independently, and eventually make individual contributions. Likewise our male students must understand that they can never be wholly autonomous as learners, for education is a necessarily cooperative enterprise made possible because we share ideas and values and use conventional literate discourse to discuss them.

Am I too conservative? Faced with this paradox myself, I am well aware that my conservative recommendations may reflect my own adherence to the female myth of literacy for participation. So I have opted to do what I encourage my students, both female and male, to do--find a way, not to neutralize the conflict between the myths of autonomy and participation by resolving the paradox, but to capture the energy created by the tension and use it to power my thinking, my learning, my teaching, my writing.

Notes

[1] Pamela J. Annas, for example, finds that in the writing women students often have to translate from their own women's language, with its distinctive style and discourse forms, to male language--as do other disenfranchised groups.

[2] The text of the instructions student writers were given for writing an autobiographical narrative of the acquisition of literacy:

> Do you remember learning to read and write? Write a narrative dramatizing one or more episodes from your experience of learning to read and/or write.

[3] In "Could Greek Women Read and Write?" Susan Guettel Cole points out the importance of the issue of social uses of literacy. The women of Graeco-Roman Egypt used written communication for dealing with personal and family affairs even though they had no political power (146).

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